

1984

BANGOR, MAINE



BY THE TIME CHARLIE HOWARD reached high school in the late 1970s, he was accustomed to his classmates' taunts and sneers. Charlie was fair-haired and small-boned. He had a learning disability. His severe asthma would have made it difficult for him to participate in sports, even if he had wanted to. The way he walked and talked set him apart from most of the other boys in Portsmouth, N.H. As a little kid, he got laughed at and called a "sissy." In later years, he got shoved around and called a "fag."

A Rose for Charlie

In the American colonies, anyone convicted of committing a homosexual act could be sentenced to death. Today, gays and lesbians are the most frequent targets of hate crimes. Data presented in 1986 to the U.S. House Judiciary Subcommittee on Criminal Justice showed that homosexuals were four times more likely to be victims of violence than persons in the general population.

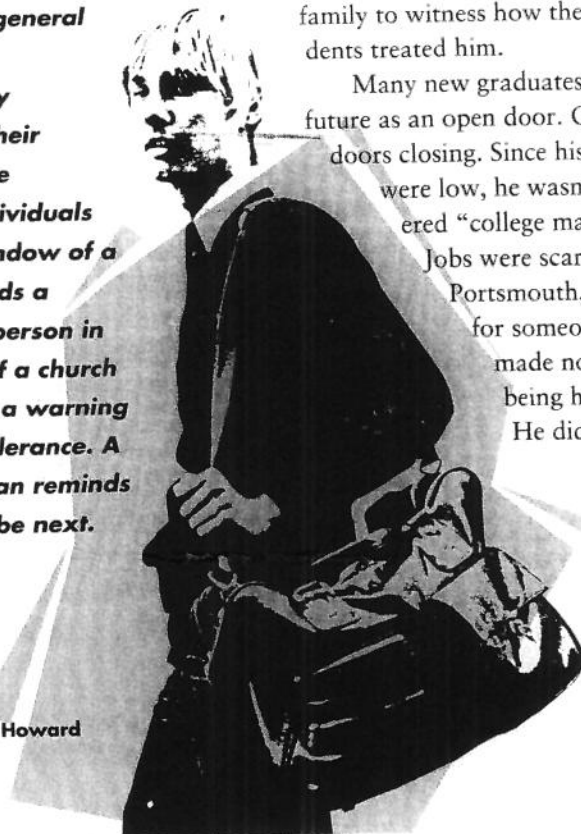
Like all bias crimes, anti-gay offenses are aimed not just at their individual victims but also at the communities to which those individuals belong. A brick through the window of a lesbian couple's apartment sends a message of hate to every gay person in the area. Graffiti on the door of a church that welcomes homosexuals is a warning to everyone who believes in tolerance. A physical assault on one gay man reminds all others that their turn could be next.

Charlie had to have a tough shell just to get through most days without crying or running away. Underneath, he accumulated a lot of scars and bruises. He wondered if people would ever leave him alone — or if, because he was gay, he would be the butt of their jokes forever. Charlie couldn't wait to get out of high school, but he skipped his graduation ceremony because he didn't want his family to witness how the other students treated him.

Many new graduates see the future as an open door. Charlie saw doors closing. Since his grades were low, he wasn't considered "college material."

Jobs were scarce in Portsmouth, especially for someone who made no secret of being homosexual. He didn't get

Charlie Howard



FIRST PERSON

"What Did I Do Wrong?"

A 27-year-old lesbian from Delaware recalls a typical encounter with homophobia.

One time before I came out, I was walking down the street with a woman I was tutoring. She was going to give me a ride home. These men approached us and surrounded us. They looked like fraternity guys. They started yelling and calling us "lezzies" and "dykes" and "freaks." It was scary. It was dark. There were just the two of us. We didn't respond to anything they had to say, and they had somewhere else to go. They just wanted to harass us. They just wanted to scare us. They thought it was funny.

We kept on walking. But how do you collect yourself after something like that happens? I was really angry. I felt helpless and wished I could have done something different. Those things kind of stick with you. That was before I came out. And deep down inside I wondered, 'How did they know? What did I do wrong?' It kind of fed my own homophobia. It lingered on and made the process of coming out that much harder. You think, 'If I come out, are they going to do that even more?'



along well with his stepfather, so he knew he couldn't continue to live at home. As long as he remained in Portsmouth, Charlie felt, he would be an embarrassment to his family.

Leaving town seemed to be his only option. He drifted around for a few years, into his early 20s, and the familiar hassles and put-downs followed wherever he went. He eventually moved in with a man in the small coastal town of Ellsworth, Maine. When this relationship broke up in early January 1984, Charlie decided that nearby Bangor, with a population of 30,000, offered better opportunities for work and for a social life.

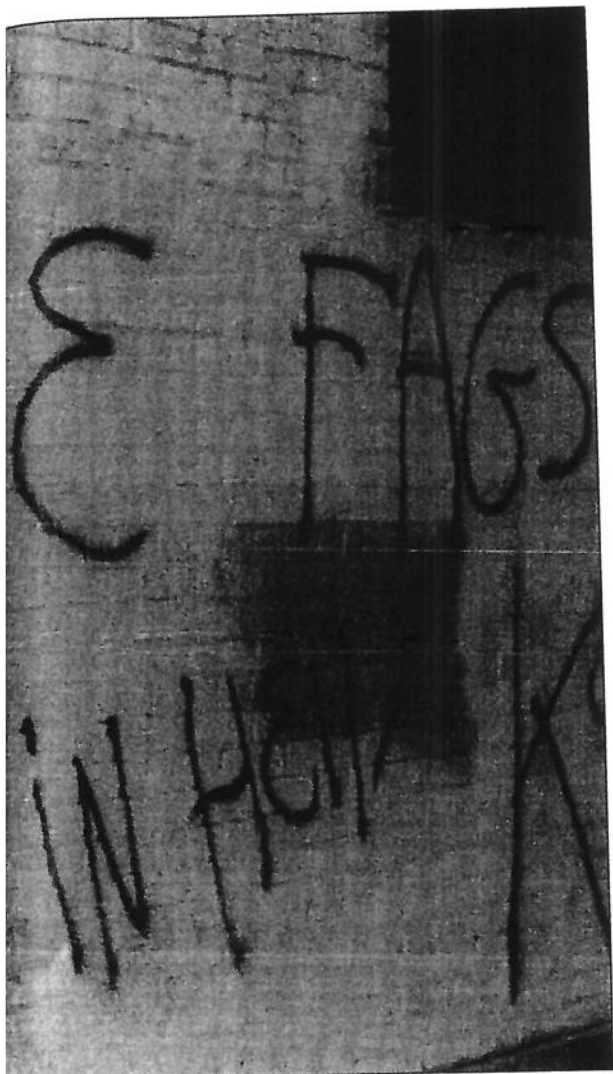
A mutual friend introduced Charlie to Scott Hamilton and Paul Noddin, who lived in a big Victorian house they had restored on Highland Avenue in Bangor. Charlie had no money, no job and no

plans. Scott and Paul offered him a place to stay while he looked for work.

As the weeks passed, Charlie's prospects remained as bleak as the Bangor winter. The local job market wasn't what he had hoped for, and after a month Scott and Paul suggested that Charlie might be better off returning to Portsmouth, where he had more connections. Charlie's mother let him move back home.

The new arrangement didn't last a week. He moved in with another man, but that situation didn't work out either. He called Scott and Paul. They could hear the pain in Charlie's voice, so they decided to help him give Bangor another try.

Something was different this time. Charlie was more upbeat and determined, and his high spirits seemed to open more



doors. A neighbor helped him get a part-time job through a city employment program. He found a warm community of friends at the Unitarian Church, which had a number of openly gay members. The church also sponsored Interweave, a gay and lesbian support group.

As a token of thanks for their generosity, Charlie surprised Scott and Paul by decorating their house for Easter and cooking an elaborate meal. A few weeks later, he took a place of his own on the third floor of an old rooming-house on First Street, behind the church. The building was run-down, but Charlie livened his surroundings with posters and plants and, eventually, a kitten.

Church had never been a big part of Charlie's life, but the acceptance he felt among the Unitarians was a new experience. Here he found a place to express his own openness and sense of humor, his love for life. He started

attending services regularly and soon decided to undertake the preparation required for membership.

The Unitarian Church and Interweave were the only two organizations in Bangor that welcomed homosexuals. Many of the other churches, in fact, were openly hostile. Fundamentalist preachers used their pulpits to blame gays and lesbians for many of society's ills. There were no gay bars in town, and local clubs routinely kicked out couples of the same sex who tried to dance together. Most of Charlie's friends had experienced verbal harassment, and several had been physically attacked. Incidents of gay-bashing often went unreported because victims expected little support from the police.

As a newcomer in town, Charlie Howard ignored some of the unwritten rules observed by more long-term gay residents. He wore whatever he felt like, for instance, even if earrings and a shoulder bag and, occasionally, eye makeup weren't "acceptable" adornments for Bangor males. He liked to call people "dearie." In moments of joy or mischief or defiance, he could burst into song (usually "I Am What I Am," from the musical *La Cage Aux Folles*).

Refusing to camouflage himself in the crowd, Charlie drew the crowd's attention — and its anger. High school kids baited him with obscenities on the street. He got ejected from the West Market Disco for dancing with a man. One day in the grocery store a middle-aged woman suddenly started shouting at him, "You pervert! You queer!" Everyone stared. Charlie dropped his basket and walked slowly toward the door, terrified. Just before exiting, he choked back his fear, turned, and blew a kiss at the cluster of hateful faces.

This confrontation seemed to mark a turning point for Charlie. The stares of strangers began to spook him a little more after that. Sometimes he was afraid to leave his apartment. He stepped outside one morning and found his pet kitten lying dead on the doorstep. It had been strangled.

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Gay people in Bangor were accustomed to intolerance and exclusion.

DOCUMENT

"Not Proper Persons"

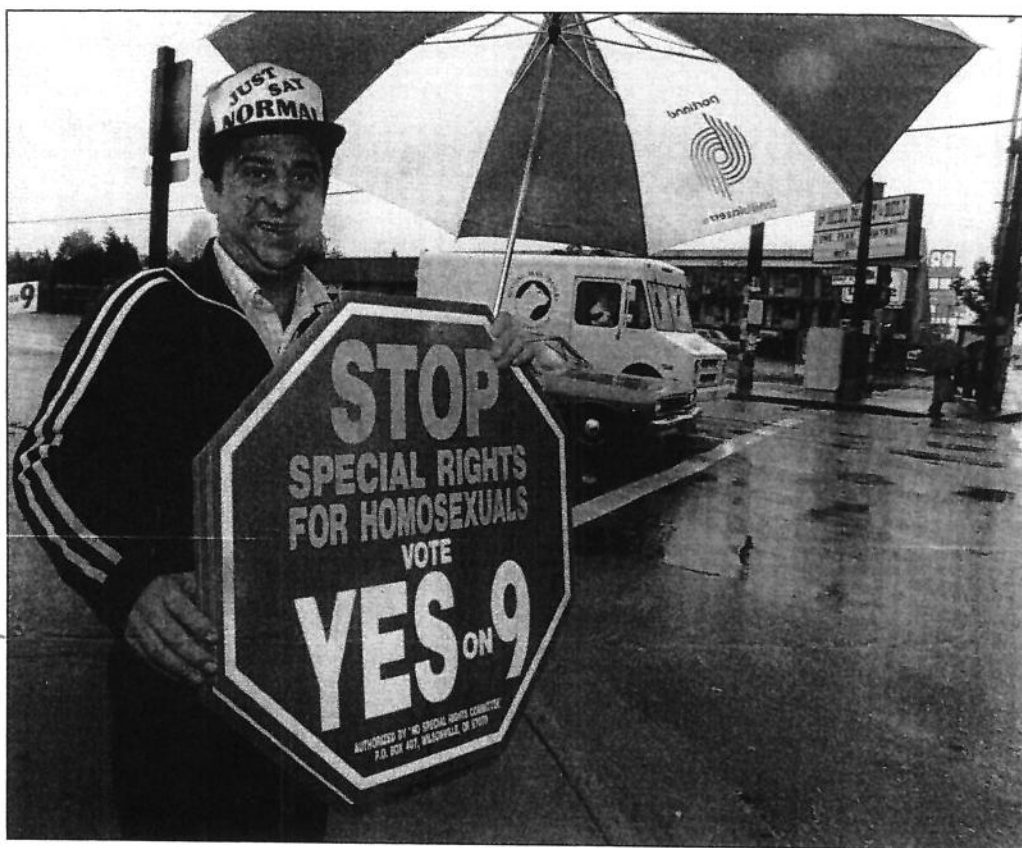
From the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, numerous government agencies participated in a campaign to remove homosexuals from federal employment. The Senate Subcommittee on Investigations issued a report on Dec. 15, 1950, outlining the reasons for this policy.

In the opinion of this subcommittee homosexuals ... are not proper persons to be employed in Government for two reasons; first, they are generally unsuitable, and second, they constitute security risks. ...

Aside from the criminality and immorality involved in sex perversion such behavior is so contrary to the normal accepted standards of social behavior that persons who engage in such activity are looked upon as outcasts by society generally. ...

As has been previously discussed in this report, the pervert is easy prey to the blackmailer. It follows that if blackmailers can extort money from a homosexual under the threat of disclosure, espionage agents can use the same type of pressure to extort confidential information or other material they might be seeking.

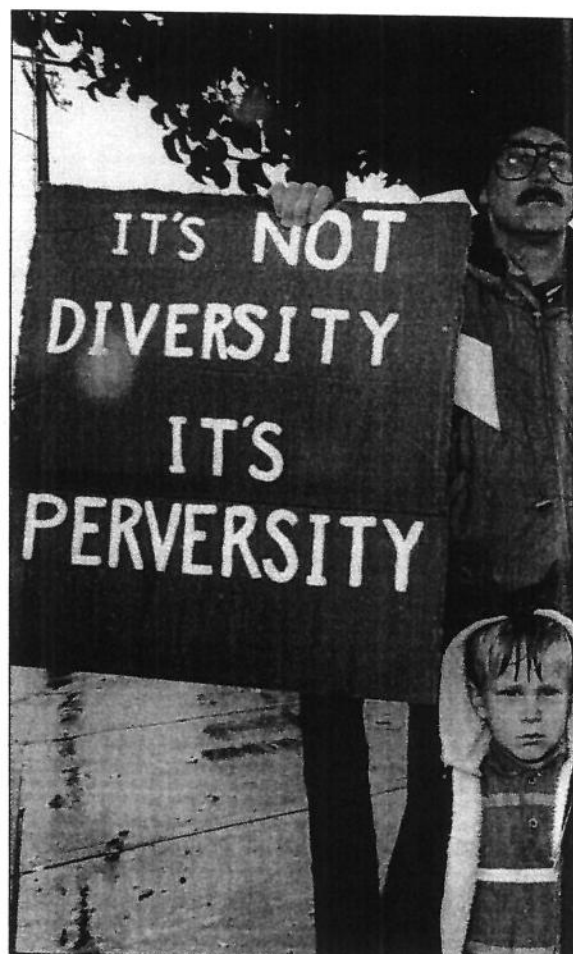
Since the initiation of this investigation considerable progress has been made in removing homosexuals and similar undesirable employees from ... positions in the Government.



Charlie's friends wished they could shield him from such cruelties, but they knew he would have to come to his own terms with a perilous world. He wasn't the only one for whom church and Interweave meetings sometimes felt like shelters in a storm.

Interweave sponsored a potluck supper on the night of Saturday, July 7, 1984. When the party broke up around 10 o'clock, Charlie talked his friend Roy Ogden into walking downtown with him to check his post office box. They headed up State Street. Midway across the bridge spanning Kenduskeag Stream, in the heart of Bangor, Charlie noticed a car slowing down just behind them. He thought it was one belonging to some high school boys who had harassed him a few days earlier. When they stopped the car and got out, he knew that he was right.

The three young men had just left a party to look for more beer when they spotted Charlie. Shawn Mabry, the driver, was a 16-year-old high school dropout who had recently been in trouble for using a nunchuk. Mabry was making a name for



himself in the city hockey league.

Daniel Ness, a year older than Shawn, lived with his family on the west side, the upper-class side of Bangor. His favorite subject was art.

Jim Baines, almost 16, managed to keep his grades up while playing football and basketball. He planned to go to college some day.

Two girls stayed behind in the car. One of them had a fake ID that she intended to use to buy the beer.

"Hey, fag!" one boy yelled. Then the three started running. Roy and Charlie took off, but Charlie tripped on the curb and fell hard onto the walkway. He couldn't get his breath: The excitement was making his asthma kick in. He felt his lungs jamming.

Charlie scrambled to stand, but the boys grabbed him. They threw him back down and laid into him with kicks and punches.

"Over the bridge!" shouted Jim Baines. Daniel grabbed Charlie under the arms and lifted. Jim got him by the legs.



Charlie was gasping now. He snatched enough air to yell, "I can't swim!" From the far end of the bridge, Roy heard his plea.

Jim and Daniel heaved Charlie up onto the guardrail. They had to pry his hands loose. Shawn gave the shove that sent him over. They looked down at the black water 20 feet below and congratulated themselves.

The girls in the car were grinding the ignition. They yelled for Jim and Daniel and Shawn to come on. The boys spotted Roy Ogden watching from the end of the bridge and promised him he'd be sorry if he ever told anyone. When they got back to the car, they were laughing.

Roy waited for the car to disappear. He could still hear the boys whooping and hollering. Then he ran along State Street till he found a fire alarm. In a few minutes, fire engines and police cars were screaming toward the bridge.

Through downtown Bangor, Kenduskeag Stream flows between smooth concrete walls. Its depth below the bridge that night was estimated at around 10 feet. The searchlights trained into the current and along the banks revealed no sign of Charlie Howard.



Around the country, the issue of gay rights has divided many communities.

DOCUMENT

The Colorado Plan

In 1992 Colorado became the first state in U.S. history to adopt a constitutional amendment denying civil rights to certain citizens. In 1994 the Colorado Supreme Court declared the amendment unconstitutional. Similar measures remained under consideration in several states.

Amendment 2

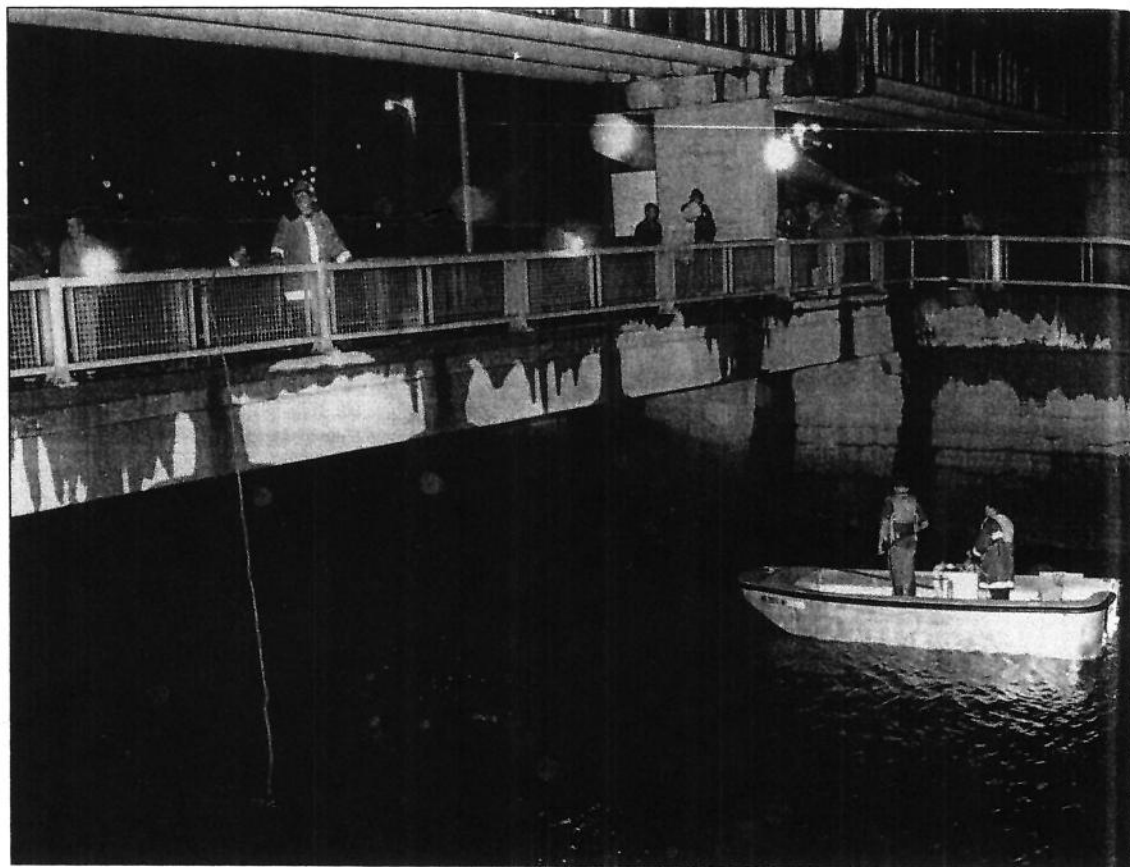
Neither the State of Colorado, through any of its branches or departments, nor any of its agencies, political subdivisions, municipalities or school districts, shall enact, adopt or enforce any statute, regulation, ordinance or policy whereby homosexual, lesbian or bi-sexual orientation, conduct, practice or relationships shall constitute or otherwise be the basis of or entitle any person or class of persons to have or claim any minority status, quota preferences, protected status, or claim of discrimination.

Shawn, Daniel, Jim and their two friends went back to their party. Everyone could see they had a story to tell. "We jumped a fag," they said, "and threw him in the stream." The other kids laughed and pumped them for details, then resumed dancing and drinking.

Around 1 a.m., rescue divers pulled the body of Charlie Howard, 23, out of the Kenduskeag, a few hundred feet down-

parents' custody. The state filed formal charges of murder the following week. The boys were later tried as juveniles rather than as adults. All three were convicted and sentenced to detention at the Maine Youth Center.

On the Monday night after Charlie Howard's murder, more than 200 people crowded into a memorial service at the Unitarian Church. Afterward, a candlelight



stream from the bridge.

Daniel Ness turned himself in the next morning, as soon as he heard the news. He couldn't believe Charlie was dead. They never intended to kill anybody — they just meant to "show" him. Shawn Mabry and Jim Baines decided to hop a freight train out of town but had second thoughts when they got to the railroad tracks. They each went home, where they were arrested. All three spent Sunday night in the Hancock County Jail.

Local and state authorities agreed on Monday morning that the youths posed no further threat to the community. Shawn, Daniel and Jim were released into their

procession crossed the bridge. Charlie's mother had requested that someone drop a white rose into the water. The marchers moved on to the main police station, where they stood silently in the street. Hecklers from the crowd of onlookers shouted obscene names.

A week later, at the spot on the bridge where Charlie Howard was tossed over, someone spray-painted three words: "Faggots Jump Here." ♦



Opposite page. Police divers searched the stream for Charlie Howard's body.

Left. In the days following the murder, the bridge became a focal point for Bangor residents' grief and outrage.